

BOOK REVIEWS

attempts at covering a wide range of maternal experiences, and not married to any all-encompassing or essential understanding of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. The editors are successful in these attempts at representing the diversity of maternal experience, yet they also acknowledge the volume's inability at representing the experiences of all women (5). Inclusive of normative and non-normative aspects of maternal subjectivity, the work of this important volume should not be underestimated and will open up new avenues of research in philosophy, as well as in the humanities.

Pregnancy in Practice: Expectation and Experience in the Contemporary U.S.

Sallie Han.

New York: Berghahn Books, 2013.

REVIEWED BY RACHEL EPP BULLER

Sallie Han examines “ordinary” pregnancy in the United States. While at first a bit off-putting, the terminology of “ordinary” here means medically unremarkable, and is opposed to the much more frequent popular and scholarly focus on “extraordinary” pregnancies that includes surrogacy, multiples, and IVF treatment. Avoiding these relative extremes of pregnancy, Han seeks insights into more common, if less publicized, experiences. In a voice that alternates between scholarly and narrative, drawing vignettes not only from the lives of her research subjects but from her own experiences as well, Han suggests that “pregnancy, like birth, ought to be recognized as both biological and social... [P]regnancy is a period of social gestation during which both babies and mothers become constructed through everyday experience” (5).

Making clear her background of cultural anthropology, Han first surveys existing literature surrounding expectations of pregnancy and motherhood in a range of related fields. She draws from the work of not only other anthropologists but also philosophers, medical historians, and a variety of other feminist scholars, including Sharon Hays’ sociological work on advice literature for expectant mothers as well research by historians Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky on the labeling of “good” and “bad” mothers. In building on this diversity of sources during her 15 months of ethnographic research, Han seeks to move past American discourses on reproduction that have become increasingly contentious in recent years.

One of the major themes that Han emphasizes throughout the book is the notion of pregnancy literacy, devoting the entire first chapter to understanding pregnancy as a literary event. Looking at the role and influence not only of pregnancy books and magazines but also of texts such as medical files and fertility charts, Han argues that literacy, broadly understood, “mediates the experience of ordinary pregnancy for American middle-class women, shaping and influencing especially their feelings toward an expected or imagined child” (32). These women are likely to have shelves filled with books on pregnancy and birth, each of which helps them to imagine and construct their experience. Han is up front about acknowledging the fairly narrow scope of her research sample, which focuses primarily on educated women of a largely white, middle- to upper-middle class demographic, the group that Han suggests is marketed as “ordinary” to begin with. While her specific focus sets up further research avenues, it should also be a point of critical questioning: why are white middle-class subjects still the standard for “ordinary” and could an expanded research focus help to change that conception?

Consumption is the second major theme that Han identifies as characteristic of “ordinary” pregnancy in America. Looking at how expectant mothers prepare houses and nurseries, as well as at the phenomenon of baby showers, Han traces the manifestations of what she terms “consumer literacy.” Acting out pregnancy-related consumerism also allows the mothers she studies simultaneously to prepare mentally for the impending birth. Han is again cognizant of the class implications surrounding consumption, but notes that even thrift involves a form of consumer literacy.

While there is some repetition of information from chapter to chapter, overall Han provides some thought-provoking insights as she seeks to “understand our expectations and experiences [surrounding pregnancy] as culturally particular and historically peculiar” (173). Han shows the ability to step back and survey the landscape as a researcher but also to lean in to the experiences of her research subjects. Especially in the third chapter, on Fetal Ultrasound Imaging, it becomes clear that Han occupies a position of intimacy and privilege as she accompanies families and is privy to so many of their private experiences. She adeptly navigates the translation of those experiences into a scholarly project and lays the foundation for future work on this topic. Significantly expanding the demographics of our research bases will allow us to move past the era when the white experience still defines the “ordinary” experience for all.